

It happened. Then nothing happened: How do we respond to the absence of response?

by Kenny Bailey and Lori Lobenstine, Design Studio for Social Intervention



Wednesday, January 6, 2021. Credit: Tasos Katopodis/Getty

We are fast approaching February 6th, which will mark one month since the coup attempt at the U.S. Capitol. We want to take this opportunity to explore not just the impact of that day, but the impact of the ensuing month and the “productive absence” generated by the fundamental lack of response.

The visuals from the coup attempt on January 6th served to both surface and amplify the brutal operating system of the United States. The rioters and the gentle police response to them were two sides of the same coin. Tepid performances of shock and distancing from politicians are the same currency. Rebecca Solnit, describing the coup attempt in her piece in [The Guardian](#), lays out how it demonstrated America’s operating system:

“Political scientist Frank Wilhoit once said: ‘Conservatism consists of exactly one proposition ... There must be in-groups whom the law protects but does not bind, alongside out-groups whom the law binds but does not protect.’ They [the rioters] are demonstrating that nothing binds them and that they expect to have whatever they want. Entitlement is too demure a word for this.” [emphasis ours]

This observation is spot on. This operating system is not broken: it’s functioning as it was meant to function. And the truth of this extends from this event back through the entire arc of American history, shaping every facet of American life. (That’s what operating systems do, after all.)

This operating system was built on land violently stolen from Indigenous people, ruled by a constitution that says “all men are created equal” while stripping enslaved Africans of their human rights, and enacted in a capitol city which was chosen to appease the slave-holding South and which still limits the power of its own predominantly-Black residents. Therefore, when white supremacists show up in our Capitol “expecting to have whatever they want” and are courteously allowed to do so, we simply have our operating system on full display.

But the normalcy of our brutal operating system is truly laid bare in what did—and did not—proceed from that day.

First, we have the sheer lack of commensurate government response, not just on that day but since. With the cleansing images of a “restored democracy” on display at Inauguration two weeks later, it was clear that we were supposed to believe that perhaps the operating system had some glitches, but nothing that couldn’t be fixed.

And what of the popular response? Since that day, we the people have largely gone about our business. We were not called upon to stop, to collectively engage in a reckoning of what we saw, to discuss or rage or breathe in or mourn what we saw, or even what we didn’t see. In fact, we were called upon to keep going, to never stop, to digest things at the speed of our newsfeeds and 24/7 news cycles, to half-chew on things in between zooms or distance learning or hustling to jobs or helping our families stay fed, safe, etc.

Pause? Who pauses? We are the people who were told to go shopping after the 9/11 attacks. We are the country who has not collectively mourned our massive loss of lives to Covid-19 or to state-sanctioned violence. We have no existing public arrangements for pausing; we have only arrangements for going, going, going. The operating system has no pause.

In our book, *Ideas—Arrangements—Effects*, we say ideas are embedded in social arrangements, which in turn produce effects. Here it looks like our arrangements for go-go-go are embedded with ideas about capitalism, life’s daily grind, Western notions of efficiency, urgency and importance. And these arrangements are producing effects at all scales: from our individual levels of stress and distress, to the toll we’ve taken on the earth, to our inability to imagine that things can be different.

A Call to Imagine New Arrangements for Pausing and Collective Sense Making

The event happened and then nothing happened. The event is now coupled with the lack of response. The productive absence of response is now reinforcing the existing operating system. To us, this says we need to be better ready to respond next time.

We want to encourage folks to imagine new social arrangements for pausing, for resisting the urge to move on, for calling on others to join us in the reckoning, for scaling ourselves to the scale of the nation. How can we self-organize to be pause-able? We need to imagine and test some techniques for calling us all into the pause, and others to help us collectively make meaning during the pause.

- *What public rituals could start the call-and-response of the pause?*
- *How can we honor the sacrifices it takes for many to step out of ordinary time?*
- *Where do we go when we pause?*
- *What ancient and modern and not-yet-imagined ways of making meaning shall we call upon, mash-up, or turn to for inspiration during the pause?*
- *What languages can we speak to each other as we make new meanings?*

- *What shape can the pause take such that in the very act of pausing, we are refusing the inevitability of the current operating system? And how can the pause start us on the path of imagining and forging a new, more just, thoughtful and humane one?*

We don't mean these to be rhetorical questions. We at DS4SI are inviting you—our readers, colleagues, partners-in-crime, compadres and fellow tricksters—to join us in imagining this work. Our goal is nothing short of coming up with ideas that we can collectively begin to prototype, such that we are ready for next time: Ready to pause and make meaning together, to collectively demand a reckoning, and at a scale that must be reckoned with. ***To demand, even, the time and space to say that we do not know what's next, but that it cannot be more of the same.***

P.S. For readers who want more of how we've thought about calls to step out of ordinary time when we need to, check out our short paper entitled [A Case for Social Emergency Procedures](#).